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VIC LOPEZ OF ILWU LOCAL 46 & 63, PCPA

INTERVIEWEE: VIC LOPEZ

INTERVIEWERS: HARVEY SCHWARTZ, RON MAGDEN

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[00:00:00] **HARVEY SCHWARTZ:** Vic, can you tell me when you were born and what year?

[00:00:13] **VIC LOPEZ:** I was born July 31, 1942.

[00:00:13] **HARVEY:** Where was that?

[00:00:17] **VIC:** It was in Ventura, California on Riverside Drive, a little house that they just tore down to build [unintelligible] Park. That's the house I was born in.

[00:00:28] **HARVEY:** What countries did your parents come from?

[00:00:32] **VIC:** My mother was in Mexico, I don't know what town. My father's from New Mexico. He's Spanish, so all our ancestors on my father's side are Spanish and they came from New Mexico.

[00:00:42] **HARVEY:** Are you bilingual?

[00:00:44] **VIC:** Yes, [says something in Spanish] .

[00:00:52] **RON MAGDEN:** Vic, did you go to schools in Ventura, or where did you go to school?

[00:01:04] **VIC:** I went to school in Ventura. I graduated from Ventura High, class of 1960.

[00:01:11] **RON:** Did you go immediately to the waterfront?

[00:01:15] **VIC:** No, I joined the California National Guard at that time—Artillery—and I went to Fort Sill Officers Candidate School for Artillery. I was in the Artillery just before the Vietnam War. And then it started and we worried—we were on standby and we didn't know if we were going to get activated or not, so all of us were buying homes and were married. We were kind of like shaking in our pants, but it never occurred so I was able to stay out of the war and keep myself alive. Several of my classmates passed over there, they were killed. They went to college, and then when they got out of college the war started and they ended up getting drafted.

[00:02:00] **RON:** How did you get on the waterfront?

[00:02:02] **VIC:** The waterfront is kind of an interesting story. My brother had a buddy that worked there and his father worked down in Port Hueneme in California. Anyway, they were buddies, and they had a chance to—because we had the name Lopez, there was some other Lopezes in that local and they thought he was one of the Lopezes that was in, part of a family member, so they got him in as a longshoreman. And all of a sudden, after he got his book, they realized he's not related to them at all. So that's how my brother got in, and he said, "Hey, if you want some casual work, go ahead and come down here and maybe you can work." Then the war had started and so there was a lot of shipping for the military, so I was able to get qualifying hours. My hours for the year, a lot of them were qualifying good years, they called it.

[00:02:53] **RON:** Do you remember the first job?

[00:02:56] **VIC:** I think we were doing bananas, but the bananas weren't in stalks, they were in boxes. So we had to kind of say every pocket, every pocket, every pocket. You'd go down and open up your hatch, and then you'd work your way down. And then [as?] your elevator was going up, rollers and people standing, pushing the boxes until you got up out of the hatch.

[00:03:17] **RON:** Were they coming from South America?

[00:03:19] **VIC:** That's a good question. I don't know where they were coming from. I don't know, that's a good question.

[00:03:24] **RON:** Six hours, eight hours?

[00:03:26] **VIC:** We were mostly eight hours, a normal shift. It was fairly easy, but a lot of it—plus I had learned to drive a forklift prior to this, so I was able to get those jobs as well when the regulars weren't—see, I don't know if I should even tell you this part, but a lot of the 40 members that were there had an opportunity to sponsor one person—off the street or a relative or something—so we were considered preferred casuals. So we could come in the hall with the regulars, but the other casuals had to stay outdoors until we finished being dispatched. So it worked out real well for me. I didn't realize this procedure was part of it.

[00:04:05] **RON:** Were you married by then?

[00:04:07] **VIC:** Yes, I got married probably about a couple years after that, and I was buying a home. My wife, I told her, "If you're going to marry me, we're going to go at least four years without having any children." She was the youngest of eight girls and she had seven brothers. So when we got married, they had 70 grandchildren already, the mom. So I says we need to be able to move, we were working. I worked as an oil research technician for Ventura Coastal Corporation in Ventura, so it was kind of a nice job. I was lucky, real fortunate.

[00:04:44] **RON:** Were you in a pool when you went in? Were there a bunch of you that went into the union together, or was it more an individual.

[00:05:00] **VIC:** Yeah, it was more of an individual thing, because I lived up in Ojai. It's about 40 miles from Port Hueneme, and so it was kind of like everybody else had their families closeby, in Oxnard or Hueneme or around that area—so I was kind of a lone wolf in a way. But just like anything, you meet people, and you start becoming friends, and you get a partner or somebody you like or they might be interested in the same kind of old cars or something. I used to ride my bicycle periodically 40 miles from Ojai to Port Hueneme, throw bananas and ride my bicycle 80 miles a day—not every day, but periodically, I would. My car wouldn't start or something and I'd just panic. Sometimes I wouldn't get out and I'd sleep behind the casual hall to get out there in the morning to be there.

[00:05:50] **HARVEY:** That brings a topic to mind. What was it like being young, growing up and also being a young guy? What was the wider community like? Was there prejudice? Was there difficulty? Was there segregation? How did you feel about living down there at that time?

[00:06:10] **VIC:** You mean at that time?

[00:06:11] **HARVEY:** High school and later.

[00:06:12] **VIC:** When I was a youngster, we didn't have any Blacks in our school. There was just a few Latinos and mostly anglo folks. The first girlfriend I had, blonde hair and blue eyes, you know, and I couldn't figure out why I couldn't go to her home. "Oh, hey, my dad doesn't know. You can't come over." That's the first time I really felt the difference. I always thought I was the same as everyone else, so I just felt a little bit of it when I was younger. Then, I didn't really understand why. Then I just kind of got used to it. You got older and you finally realize that you are different, so you're just going to have to roll with the punch. In about the sixth grade, they were doing something with the school and they transferred us to another school for our sixth grade, and then there was a lot of Blacks there and some Chinese people. I stuck around a lot with the Chinese people. It seemed like I got along better with them than anyone else, so it worked out.

[00:07:12] **HARVEY:** What about the union? What about when you first getting in, working bananas and getting into the union?

[00:07:19] **VIC:** It seemed like it was just a struggle kind of a situation, where you want to get in because you're trying to survive basically—I was a single parent then—so it didn't matter how I went about it. But

anyway, once I got the job because I was a casual in Port Hueneme for 15 years. Then when that port got distressed, they opened up LA for the smaller ports and my brother transferred. A short while after that, he got a letter to sponsor someone. He called me and said, “Do you want to start all over again?” I said, “Okay, where do I sign?”

I just moved from Ojai to Long Beach and started buying a house. Of course, I was a single parent by then, so anyway it worked out to where I was excited. It was kind of exciting that here I was starting all over again. But in two years, I had my Class B book, so it worked out real well for me. And I joined a gang and I worked ship gang for five years in the hold. Then I got my letter for crane training, and then I quit the gang and started working on the crane, so it worked out nice.

[00:08:26] **HARVEY:** Any difference between dealing with the Spanish-speaking guys in the local and the anglos in the local?

[00:08:32] **VIC:** No, I didn’t see any difference. I knew how to speak Spanish because my father was a field superintendent for Ventura Coastal Growers, and so he, as a young teenager—like 14—he made me a foreman, so I was able to—my mom didn’t want us to speak any Spanish in the house because she had so many problems, so she said, “No Spanish in the house. No Spanish in the house.” So I didn’t learn much. But out there working with the braceros—they’d come from Mexico and work on a camp; they’d work for six months and then went back—they taught me the majority of the Spanish that I learned. I’d draw a picture of something and they would tell me what it’s called, and that’s how I learned. I’d draw a picture, draw a picture, draw a picture and say, “What’s this? Cómo se dice?”

[00:09:18] **HARVEY:** What kind of trouble did your mother have?

[00:09:21] **VIC:** She just had like a prejudice that she probably went through for speaking Spanish. You know how people speak Spanish and they kind of have a negative attitude about people speaking a different language—Orientals. Some people have an attitude about “This is America. English,” and all that sort of thing. I think she went through that kind of a problem. She never talked to me about it, but that’s what I assume was happening, why she didn’t want us to do it. I thought maybe she was ashamed of it or something. But I think it was mostly to keep us learning English so we wouldn’t have the problems that she had, so we could go this direction rather than this. But my father could write and speak Spanish and English, so that’s the way I would have liked to have done it.

[00:10:06] **RON:** You said your father was a school superintendent?

[00:10:08] **VIC:** My father was a field superintendent for Ventura Coastal Growers. Plus he had a hobby of roping. He was a roper, you know, he liked to do the horses. We always had horses. We lived in the city, but the farm—the ranch—that they had with all the trees, they had a big pasture, and the president of the company had a horse. My dad liked horses—we grew up with horses and cattle. We used to milk cows every day, twice a day, and squirt each other, you know, with the nipple. Anyway, we always had horses, so when I grew up we were out there on the weekends, or when we had a chance I was out there with my father. They’d provide a vehicle for him, and we always had a truck. I had both worlds, city and a BB gun. It was kind of a fun experience for me as a boy growing up.

[00:10:59] **RON:** How old were you when you went onto the longshore?

[00:11:03] **VIC:** It was interesting because I was born in 42—this must have been, you’d have to do the math, in 68 is when I kind of started, 1968. It was a little while because I did my time in the military, plus mixing the military and doing casual work. Then I went to school also to—I like hotrods, so sometimes I would want

something made to make a hotrod. So I'd need something welded and I'd have to take it down to a welding shop. So I got to where it wasn't right or I had to change it and it was a hassle, so I went to Ventura College to be a welder. After that welding experience, I was able to get a job working for a bridge outfit out of Texas as a welder. Then I went to Ventura College again to be a carpenter. You know how the periods are—first period, second period, third and journeyman—so I was able to get a job as a carpenter as well. So, driving a lift, I ended up driving those big lifts that lift up this way with a long extension boom, so I never drove—

[00:11:57] **RON:** How many unions have you been in?

[00:12:00] **VIC:** When I was a welder, we didn't even have a union, and then we decided kind of "Hey, let's go see if a union could help us out." We ended up doubling our income by going through the union, so it worked out real well. We kind of had a little bit of discussion about the union. "What are we going to do? Let's go approach them and see what we're going to do." And we ended up better off.

[00:12:24] **HARVEY:** What union was that?

[00:12:26] **VIC:** God, I don't know. To tell you the truth, I don't know the title of it, I just know it was a union. But it worked out well for everyone. Everyone was kind of pleased. Some of the guys, I felt, were a little less money than I had, but I was ready to fight to get more money. Some of the guys had families and they didn't want to lose their jobs. A lot of Mexicans come over and they gave them the opportunity to work, and so they couldn't take the gamble, where I could. But then I'd lost my first wife and I remarried and I became a single parent. I got custody of the baby when he was a year old. So I think that makes you put more struggle into the effort. When you know you have to work, you don't depend on anything else except you.

[00:13:14] **HARVEY:** Were you in the Brotherhood of Carpenters when you were working as a carpenter?

[00:13:21] **VIC:** Yeah, the Brotherhood of Carpenters. I don't know the local number but we were union there as well.

[00:13:31] **HARVEY:** What was the best product on the waterfront that you worked, the most pleasant cargo that you worked.

[00:13:41] **RON:** The one you'd rather work than any other.

[00:13:45] **VIC:** The job I liked the best?

[00:13:47] **HARVEY:** Yeah.

[00:13:48] **VIC:** I liked driving the crane, because once I got up there and once you know you have it, it's like a skill. It's like balancing, anything you find that you know how to do well. I liked what I did, and I felt that I was good at it. Like surfriding, once you hit that wave and you have your balance, that thrill is the same way as when I was in the crane. I got to have that feeling. Plus, communicating with your people, being able to talk. "Hey, So-and-So, are you clear?" You'd signal people, you were being polite to everybody. Sometimes you get people that have a bad day and they're not so friendly. But anyway, just get everybody calmed down, and I think I really enjoyed that part, having that kind of authority over certain people, you know?

[00:14:33] **HARVEY:** How did you get to be a crane driver?

[00:14:36] **VIC:** Just went to school. After so many years, they send you a letter to go to school, and so you just go and go take your training and then all of a sudden they certify you or they don't. With that certification, we

had the opportunity to go steady with certain companies, so I went steady for Matson. I told them a description of what I knew had to do and then they said, “Okay, then let’s try you out.” They tried me out and they said, “You’re hired.” Then Matson sold out down there in California to a different facility. I went to the hall and they had another application for Hunjin and I applied for that and they hired me there, so I was at Hanjin for a while.

[00:15:21] **HARVEY:** What product early on, when you were first on the waterfront, was the most unpleasant? What was a lousy product, one you did not like?

[00:15:28] **VIC:** Well, there was a lot of them, but I never looked at it as anything uncomfortable. I knew I was going to make some money and I didn’t care how uncomfortable it was. Like slopping hogs, you know, I’m just going to do it.

Even [unintelligible], when you’re down in the tunnel and it’s all black and all that dust and yucky. I think clerking [chuckles] I wasn’t hot on clerking, because your brain was having to think on some of the clerking jobs. I think those are the most unpleasant for me, because I’m so used to physical that bringing in your brain and having to figure out computer and do this in a hurry, that was uncomfortable for me.

[00:16:09] **HARVEY:** That would be with Local 63.

[00:16:11] **VIC:** Yeah, but some of the times they had excess work, and then they would bring it over to 13 because sometimes we wouldn’t get out, or they’d take the 13 that the Class Bs didn’t get it and then they’d send that excess over to the casual office and the casuals would get that, any kind of work. So they’d send clerking jobs, even print jobs. Sometimes you don’t even have to be certified to drive the crane as long as you know how to do it because they need you, so sometimes you can get away with, you know, qualified but not certified. I would say clerking [laughing] would be my most unpleasant job.

[00:16:47] **HARVEY:** You mentioned 1968 as being . . .

[00:16:51] **VIC:** . . . the time that I was getting out of the military. Around there, I don’t even remember for sure, my mind, I’ve been in boilers and blowing up and I’ve had concussions, so some of those things, it’s hard for me to remember every single thing, so it was around that time.

[00:17:08] **HARVEY:** How did you get concussions?

[00:17:11] **VIC:** I was in a boiler explosion when I was working as an oil research technician. In the morning, you had to light this big boiler to apply all the energy for the plant, because it served all the machinery that goes in there. And apparently some welding slag fell into the valve and it got stuck. You know, if you light your stove and it doesn’t turn on? It was left on all night. So when I came in to start it—it was an electric started—the electricity hit that gas and it blew the explosion doors off the side and it blew me back on top of this big tank and cut the back of my head, and they rushed me to the hospital.

[00:17:53] **HARVEY:** Oh my goodness. Was this before you came on the waterfront in 68?

[00:17:57] **VIC:** It was about the same time, because I was working that and working two, sometimes three jobs at the same time. It wasn’t just all of a sudden just waterfront. Because there was the military stuff, and working for their, and also—yeah, so everything kind of mixed, you know. When I could get down there, I would, and when I didn’t—then, once I established I want to do this full-time; this is what day and night, I’m going to go down there, so you kind of dedicate yourself that you’re going to put your time there.

[00:18:35] **RON:** Did you have any other accident on the waterfront?

[00:18:43] **VIC:** I was up on the crane, and you know how you have the floor glass?

[00:18:48] **RON:** Yeah.

[00:18:48] **VIC:** I was cleaning the glass and the radio came on—there was a truck down there waiting for me—so it startled me. When you got out of the military, I was coming out with like shellshock. You always had that little nervousness about you with those [scanners?] going off—I just [put?] my head back and I whapped my head and knocked myself out. They had to come, I guess, with the fire department and come up and rescue me. I don't even remember any of it. All I remember is waking up in the hospital. That's how long I was knocked out. People tell me that's what happened how I hit my head.

[00:19:26] **RON:** That was quite a concussion.

[00:19:28] **VIC:** Concussion from hitting, well, this way. I was down on my knees trying to clean the glass. You had to be kind of careful because sometimes I'll take the metal plating out so I can clean it good—some guys liked to eat sunflower seeds up there and spit on the floor, and I like to have the cab nice and clean. So I'd take out the metal grating so I can clean the glass and get in the corners, so I could be careful where I stand, I don't break through the glass and fall down. So it was kind of precarious in the corner when my head hit the [foam?] foundation part.

[00:20:00] **HARVEY:** Do you recall the 1971 strike? It was a long strike.

[00:20:01] **VIC:** Yeah, I barely recall. I don't recall a lot. I know I've gone to a lot of pickets, but I don't remember the strike per se.

[00:20:19] **HARVEY:** Do you remember how you survived during that strike, or one similar? That was the last big longshore strike until the employers locked the union out in 2002, so it was a big deal at the time.

[00:20:30] **VIC:** Yeah, that's a good question. I might have probably saved, because I saved my money a lot, so I might have lived off my savings, if that was the case. Because I don't remember. That was 71?

[00:20:44] **HARVEY:** Yes.

[00:20:45] **VIC:** So I think I probably, if anything, I know I saved my money so I might have lived off of that.

[00:20:50] **RON:** You said you joined a gang when you were coming on.

[00:20:55] **VIC:** A ship gang.

[00:20:57] **RON:** A ship gang. That's a little different term, a ship gang. Were you a seagoing longshoreman?

[00:21:07] **VIC:** No, a ship gang deals with general cargo instead of containers. Except periodically sometimes they'll have maybe a 20-foot container on deck or something like that, but the majority of the cargo was lumber, steel beams, those big round metal coils that they used. Sometimes they're so heavy, the big semi-trucks, you only can put one on them, that's how heavy those things are. But it was just general cargo. When general cargo comes in, the ship gangs will get that job first. But when there are no regular general cargo, then we have to go after everybody. Then they call the people that are checked in for the whole board. Then after they clear everybody, they'd call gangs and then we get our job. But when ship gang has general cargo, we were ahead of

them and they come behind us. That's the way we did it. Then you'd have your winch drivers and the people in the hold, the people in the front. Everybody has a position that they normally work. Always.

[00:22:12] **RON:** Of 10 or 14 in the gang, how many were in the ship's gang?

[00:22:20] **VIC:** I'd say about seven. You have scale in the hold who drives the lift, and then you have your front person and you have your winch drivers, so I'd say around there.

[00:22:30] **RON:** You said you were the driver of the forklift.

[00:22:54] **VIC:** Yeah. Scale in the hold they call it. That's was my position on the gang. I'd go do scale in the hold. But you kind of try to get to where you learn how to do just about everything, but most of the time we all kind of stuck to whatever we did. The front person stayed in the front, and the winch driver usually did the winches and the scale people went into the hold and you had your hold person.

[00:23:17] **RON:** Does that position, or that group, still exist, the ship's gang?

[00:23:25] **VIC:** I'm pretty sure but I don't [unintelligible] .

[00:23:28] **RON:** How long were you in that ship's gang?

[00:23:31] **VIC:** There was a rule about getting your Class A that you had to do at least five years prior—you could do your five years driving a truck or be in a gang for five years, and then you had your qualifications to be a Class A. I said, "I don't especially care driving a truck. I'm going to do my time in the hold."

[00:23:55] **RON:** Were you penalty paid for driving the forklift?

[00:24:01] **VIC:** It was the pay you get for all the positions. Everything is about the same, the way I remember anyway.

[00:24:09] **RON:** Okay. Did you have to be certified to drive the forklift?

[00:24:13] **VIC:** Yeah, I went to school to learn how to drive a forklift. I already knew how to drive one but it doesn't matter. You need to know how to drive a car and go get your driver's license, you know. It was kind of like that. You got your letter to go to school and you did it or you didn't it. Same with the top handlers, you know, the ones that pick up the containers, like a big forklift with a big bean on it. So it's the same—all the equipment, we had to go to school for.

[00:24:34] **RON:** Were you ever involved in a grievance? Were you ever on a job where suddenly something went wrong, safety-wise or something, and you had to walk off the job? Never in a grievance, huh?

[00:24:56] **VIC:** No, I don't remember anything where that happened that I can remember. If I get home I'm going to say, damn, don't you remember this, don't you remember that? [laughter] Someday you're going to have to start reminding me. "Don't you remember? You used to be the main guy jumping up inside?" "No, I don't remember. Yeah, I forget."

[00:25:16] **RON:** Were you active in the local, getting up and speaking?

[00:25:20] **VIC:** Not much. I'm kind of antisocial and self-centered and kind of shy.

[00:25:25] **RON:** Okay.

[00:25:27] **VIC:** Maybe it I'd had a couple of pops, maybe I'd get into it a little bit more.

[00:25:30] **RON:** You didn't lead the charge.

[00:25:32] **VIC:** Yeah, yeah. Not always, but I was there along the picket when we had to be.

[00:25:40] **RON:** Were some of them close to you in the ship's gang as a friend?

[00:25:46] **VIC:** No, I was pretty much of a loner, you know, I'm an introvert. So I don't have a lot of people come over, friends or anybody, other than when we were waiting for a job. If we didn't get a job, I was in the parking lot and we were all sitting around. I had a Volkswagen camper, so a lot of the guys had seats where they guys would sit there, and then everybody could have a drink or whatever, tell jokes.

[00:26:08] **RON:** Were there lulls in the job at times, when the ships didn't come in?

[00:26:15] **VIC:** Yeah, there was times when it was slow. It was nice when you were steady because you know you're going to working. But the thing is, there were times at the hall when we didn't always get out. Then some other jobs come in—like clerking, as I mentioned, or any kind of a job—if you're close, you want to hang out there because they'd call your number because you were the next one out or the third one out. Just sticking it out, I've been able to pick up jobs, or stay there till after lunch because some people don't get back in time, they get fired and they call the hall. "Hey, we need a replacement for this person."

[00:26:46] **RON:** Did you hear or see Harry Bridges over the years?

[00:26:53] **VIC:** It must have been shortly—I think it was in the 80s, somewhere around 84 or 85 or 86, around there—he came down there.

[00:27:02] **RON:** After you retired.

[00:27:03] **VIC:** But he was getting a little bit elderly. Then I didn't know him from just he's like, just another person to me at that time. Now, as I've gotten into the union and seen how popular—I met his daughter—so if I would have known then how important of a person he was, I would have maybe spent more time talking with him or asking him questions. I remember one thing he did say to me, though. "Hang in there, kid." I remember that.

[00:27:31] **RON:** You know, he used that phrase on a lot of cards.

[00:27:35] **VIC:** Is that right?

[00:27:36] **RON:** Yeah.

[00:27:36] **VIC:** I thought I was the only one he said it to. [laughing]

[00:27:38] **RON:** No. I've interviewed a tremendous number of people who knew him, in a way, and every once in a while, one of them brings out a Christmas card, birthday card, and it says, "Hang in there. Harry." There's another one he used. He had two favorite phrases, and I wondered if they just stuck them in an envelope and sent them out. What was the other? I know he used the phrase "Win this strike"—when they were in a

strike, I've some 36 and that kind of thing. But I was thinking he had a very bold handwriting, and if somebody was trying to copy it, they'd have a little trouble with that. But I remember that "Hang in there" is one of his—

[00:28:34] **VIC:** I know he said it to me. Because I remember him saying "kid," because I was just, I didn't consider myself a kid but most of the fellows I thought were my age were his age. Because I see them now, they're still working. They said, "Man, you're that old? You're going to be 80 in five years?" I'm just surprised how [much] younger the people that I was with. Because the military time, that's a few years where I was away from it.

[00:29:02] **RON:** Did you do anything in the warehouse?

[00:29:05] **VIC:** No, not really that I can remember, other than stack up coils or wire or things like that when I might have had a job on the front, and you're coming off a ship and you're hooking it and taking it into the warehouse. I don't know if that's what you're referring to or not.

[00:29:21] **RON:** Yeah.

[00:29:21] **VIC:** But with a forklift, and you stack it back and forth.

[00:29:23] **RON:** Right.

[00:29:24] **VIC:** Yeah, I've done that.

[00:29:31] **RON:** The forklift, did you handle it in the hold of the ship?

[00:29:35] **VIC:** Yeah, sometimes I did. It was precarious at times because sometimes the cargo's stacked where it's not even.

[00:29:44] **RON:** That's right.

[00:29:46] **VIC:** So sometimes you get stuck and you have to get the gear to lift you up and move you over.

[00:29:51] **RON:** Get the field, yeah.

[00:29:52] **VIC:** Yeah. It was kind of a challenge at first where everything is all forward down there, but once you get to a place where you can finally move around—like if you're doing pallets of bananas—once you get a little hole, then you get your lift and then you start moving around to where you get two lifts down there.

[00:30:12] **RON:** Did the exhaust ever bother you?

[00:30:16] **VIC:** No, it didn't bother me too much. I don't know why it didn't, but it just didn't. Even when I was welding, it didn't bother me that much because I'd breathe in a lot of that.

[00:30:24] **RON:** You never had a headache?

[00:30:25] **VIC:** No, it never bothered me, you know.

[00:30:28] **RON:** Did you ever handle asbestos?

[00:30:32] **VIC:** Not that I know of. I probably might of but I wasn't aware that it was asbestos when I was younger. Back then you think everything's fine, and why is it here if it's not?

[00:30:44] **RON:** You have no breathing difficulty?

[00:30:46] **VIC:** No, I think I'm okay. But probably my lungs might be full of all kinds of crud, but I think I'm feeling okay—today.

[00:30:56] **RON:** Today, yeah. You're enjoying retirement?

[00:31:00] **VIC:** Actually, it's kind of a challenge, because it seems like I've gotten more done—I have a big five-bedroom house and three bathrooms and two fireplaces—but it seems like I'm spending more time working on the house than I did when I was working. I don't know why. I guess because I did the work faster because I knew I had to get to work, but now I can just kind of kick back and just and set the alarm. The first thing I enjoyed in retirement, I didn't have to set that alarm, you know, get up there and break it down and get the work, or get the dispatch.

[00:31:26] **RON:** You didn't have any regrets when you retired from the waterfront, or did you?

[00:31:36] **VIC:** I really did have regrets, because I really enjoyed what I did. After working your way through all those years and all that grunt work, and finally finding something that's comfortable that you feel good with, and then you have to retire from it, it just made it hard. Because it's a good deal when you're working with a partner and you're working a deal with that. You just went to work your four-one-four with each other, but sometimes we'd kind of cheat on it a couple weeks and a couple weeks and a couple weeks, you know? Especially if you were steady. If you're steady, you're not going out of the hall, so you can work a month. "You work a month and I'll work a month." I shouldn't say that, but anyway, sometimes you work a deal.

[00:32:17] **RON:** We hear day after day about the fewer and fewer longshoremen. Like the guy who was talking about Los Angeles yesterday, losing 600 jobs because of automation. Have you thought about that?

[00:32:38] **VIC:** I think that's why I'm in the Pensioner Club member, to know what's going on and what's happening with our retirement. Some people could say, "Hey, we're going to take this much away from you folks, and we'll start over here and lower it down." A lot of things could be happening. I used to go to all the meetings, but since we didn't have a quorum, so they would send us—it would be half full, but there wasn't a quorum—back home again. I said, "Hey, a bunch of us are here. They're just people that just go to the meeting."

[00:33:08] **RON:** Yeah, yeah.

[00:33:11] **VIC:** That was kind of disappointing for me not to just continue with having a meeting, so I joined the Pensioners Club because it's almost the same thing. Because a lot of people say, oh, they don't want to go down there, they'd rather pay the fines than go to the meetings, and so we have people that don't really care that much. Their heart isn't into it. They're after the money or whatever they're after, they're not ready to fight for what you got—some of the people. Some people are real dedicated, some longshore people. It's like belonging to a biker club or something. You guys are all buggers in the clubs.

[00:33:48] **RON:** Yes.

[00:33:48] **HARVEY:** Vic, in the 70s there was a controversy over going steady or not going steady. People discussed that matter. Did you get involved with any of those discussions or did anybody ask you anything about it?

[00:34:01] **RON:** No, I just knew that it was an opportunity of something better than going to that hall. But I felt guilty for some reason. Even though I was a steady person, I knew that that hall really is the backbone of all of us rotating that work, rotating that work. Once you have a steady person, the employer has like a little finger on you. I really always felt like I was like losing something was my feeling from the people from the hall. All of a sudden, I'm over here. If everybody went steady, then what? So I felt that if you could really stop the steady people and keep everybody back down there and everybody does their time, and the next lower person on hours is out next and the next person lower than that gets out next. I think that would be kind of good, rather than the steadies.

[00:34:52] **HARVEY:** Did anybody ever bring up the question?

[00:34:56] **VIC:** No, no one's ever asked me personally. But I'm sure there's some people [grr] in the crowd, but I felt it myself. As an individual, I said, man, this doesn't seem right. But with the same thing, I still had this security little blanket that you don't have worry about going to the hall. [Unintelligible] is going to cover me. So it worked out. Eventually I gave it up and went back to the hall.

[00:35:27] **HARVEY:** How come you gave it up?

[00:35:31] **VIC:** That's a good reason [question?] . I think I just wanted to try different facilities and their cranes. I think that's one of the reasons. One of the ones was, of course, when a company moved. And I didn't want to get in the hammerhead because I liked the lower [trans standards?] in the yard—not so much stress, not so much pressure at my age. I just felt just comfortable there at that level. But I was certified for the hammerheads, but I just liked where I was. So once you find a place where you're comfortable, you try to stay there.

[00:36:03] **HARVEY:** Sure. Every involved in any politics, any political movements or anything?

[00:36:07] **VIC:** No, not really. I think the only real thing was, like I say, when we were welding and going to the union, starting out there, because the company that I worked with when I was younger, they were against the union. No one ever really approached me—when I was an oil research technician when I was younger when I first got out of school—to form a union. We were getting paid okay, I was able to start buying a house, so I really didn't really think about it that way, about a union, what is it? I was like a bad guy, you know, everybody was Republican in the company, so I was a Republican, you know?

[00:36:41] **RON:** Did you work your children with horses? When you were growing up, you mentioned your father worked with horses.

[00:36:53] **VIC:** Yeah, we had cattle and pigs. We used to have to milk the cows, and we had plenty of milk.

[00:36:59] **RON:** In your generation, was it all urban? Did you live down in the city?

[00:37:04] **VIC:** Well, both. In my generation, most everyone lived in the city. I was just real fortunate that my dad had access to a big pasture and horses. Not everybody had that, so I could talk to people who didn't know anything about cows, or feeding hogs, or butchering. When they're young, they go up and they're glad to see

you when you show up and then you've got to butcher them, so that was real sad for me, that part. It was different but that's the way it was when I was younger.

[00:37:38] **HARVEY:** What year did you retire, Vic?

[00:37:40] **VIC:** Around 2009.

[00:37:43] **HARVEY:** Do you remember the 2002 lockout, when the whole industry was locked out by the employer?

[00:37:51] **VIC:** I'd have to say I don't. I don't remember because I don't know if I was really busy, what I was doing. I just don't remember. I feel kind of embarrassed that I don't.

[00:38:03] **HARVEY:** Do you remember being on picket duty or anything like that?

[00:38:05] **VIC:** No, I remember going on picket duty when they asked, "We're going to do this, we're going to do that." But sometimes you're just walking around in a daze and sometimes you don't know. You don't have that spirit yet, you don't have that really fighting and remembering why you're doing this, rather than just doing it because somebody asked you to or you're supposed to or you should. So I kind of feel guilty that I really hadn't my whole heart into really doing that, so I feel embarrassed about even saying that part. If you would have told me you were going to ask me that question, I could have memorized something, you know [laughing] where I was, what I was doing and why.

[00:38:41] **HARVEY:** That's okay. You became at some point a Civil War reenactor. Why does a longshoreman become a Civil War reenactor? The Civil War reenacting world is a world into itself. Why does that attract you as a longshoreman?

[00:38:58] **VIC:** Like going to do Civil War reenacting?

[00:39:01] **HARVEY:** Yeah, why do you become a Civil War reenactor?

[00:39:04] **VIC:** I just went out and saw them running around there and shooting their guns, and the horses, and I said, "You know, I think I'd like to do this." Everybody likes movies and maybe favorite actors. I said, "This is right here and it's real." Plus my school, when I graduated in 59- 60, we were able to go to Pasadena Playhouse, and they teach you how to ballet dance, how to fence. It's an acting school, and they have a small theater there. So when I was younger, I slowly started thinking, well, maybe I could be an actor or something. So when I saw those, I went and approached them and said, "Hey, what do you need to do to do this?" "Well, you need to get this, you need to get a hat and a gun and a belt buckle and all that sort of stuff." Then slowly I became [part of] the group.

[00:39:52] **HARVEY:** How long ago was this that you got into it?

[00:39:54] **VIC:** Oh, boy, that's a good question. I would say probably around 15 years ago. They have the cowboys and Indians and they have the South and the North, and I always wanted to be a Confederate, you know, the bad dude. Stars and Bars, that was me, I was going to do that. Other fellows would wear both uniforms, have both uniforms [to] fill in if somebody's not there. I said, "If I'm not going to be a Confederate, I'm not going to play." I joined a cavalry group, so you had your saber. That's a challenge when you're riding a horse and you pull your saber out, and then you're trying to get your saber back in, and you're stabbing your leg

and stabbing the horse, and you're grabbing your horse and shooting your gun! And the horse starts taking off and is running and you're shooting the horse in his ear and he's spooking. It could be dangerous, too.

[00:40:44] **RON:** You're known for your hats, and I need to ask, when did this fashion hit you? You have more different hats than [unintelligible] .

[00:40:58] **VIC:** Yeah, I have a lot of hats. I probably have maybe 250 hats, a variety of different kinds. Sometimes I'll go to Goodwill and I'll see a hat that's been squashed or something, you know, a straw hat. I'll soak it and then get it to where I can shape it and then let it dry, and shape it till it's finally shaped the way I kind of want it to look. Then I'll varnish it, and then it'll stay stiff. It won't be so collapsey anymore.

[00:41:22] **RON:** How long have you been doing that with hats?

[00:41:26] **VIC:** I've always liked hats since I was a kid. My father always wore a Western hat—not always, but he always wore a hat, so I always thought hats were part of just like wearing your shoes.

[00:41:37] **RON:** Did you wear them on the job?

[00:41:39] **VIC:** I always wore hats on the job, but on the job sometimes I'd wear a ballcap.

[00:41:46] **RON:** Were you known for your hats?

[00:41:52] **VIC:** Yeah, I have a lot of hats. Sometimes I'll change hats during the day. I'll be doing something and I'll put on a hat if I'm mowing, or if maybe I'm going to get under car maybe I might put a ballcap on. It depends on what I'm going to be doing or who I'm going to see. Of if I'm going to go to the grocery store, I might want to change. Or if I'm wearing something that doesn't match the hat. I'm sure glad they invented mirrors because I think I'd be in trouble without them.

[00:42:18] **RON:** One of my proudest moments was when you let me wear your hat. I enjoyed that. [laughter]

[00:42:25] **VIC:** Good thing I wasn't sharing my underwear!

[00:42:29] **RON:** It was great.

[00:42:30] **VIC:** Yeah, my Speedos, I can you wearing my Speedos.

[00:42:34] **RON:** In San Diego in, I think, Vancouver . . . where else? I've always met you at the convention, and I've always photographed you. And you are the title page of that convention.

[00:42:50] **VIC:** I take that as a compliment.

[00:42:51] **RON:** Oh, it is.

[00:42:52] **VIC:** You never know what's around the corner.

[00:42:54] **RON:** Yeah. And that means the next—I don't know exactly which hat I'm going to use on this one when we put the program together, but you can be assured that you are in the driver's seat. [laughter]

[00:43:09] **VIC:** Okay, we'll see. You fellows know what time it is?

[00:43:12] **HARVEY:** It's close to noon.

[00:43:14] **VIC:** Okay, they said to be down there by 12:30, so we're still good. Yeah, I like felt hats. Sometimes people—I'll see a hat and it's not shaped the way I like, but they really like the way the hat looks on the but it wouldn't be something I would wear. So it's all individual, just like clothing or shoes—you know, like these shoes—we all have different kinds of shoes.

[00:43:42] **RON:** It gives you a distinct character.

[00:43:44] **VIC:** Well, they're around. I don't consider myself that. I'm just a regular old Joe as far as I'm concerned.

[00:43:52] **HARVEY:** Vic, when the United Farm Workers came along, did you have any impression, or did you look at that in any manner? Cesar Chavez's group. What did you think about him? Did you want to help him in any way?

[00:44:09] **VIC:** I thought about him. I thought about him. I didn't help. I didn't really join the United Farm Workers or go out help them picket. No, I just didn't think about it that much. I just know that it was a struggle. A lot of them—I like Bob Dylan, I grew up kind of with him, and he has a lot of songs similar—and Peter Seeger—all those protest kind of songs. Unless you're there and unless you're struggling with it and getting involved—I think that's the main thing about youngsters is getting involved, and try to totally understand what you're doing. Sometimes you get to the age where you're just doing it because it's just the thing to do; you feel guilty that you didn't help. But sometimes I just was either too busy or doing some other stuff. It's not that I didn't care, it's just maybe something else came up that I just didn't participate.

[00:45:06] **RON:** Did you ever hear from Cesar Chavez? Did you ever hear him speak?

[00:45:13] **VIC:** Oh, yeah. I never talked to him, but of course I've heard of him.

[00:45:18] **RON:** He was very close to longshoremen in the Puget Sound area. He came up to the hall four or five times. One time he didn't want us to go into Safeway because of the grape business, so we agreed to. Safeway was giving away free turkeys if you'd come in the store. It's an interesting story. Anyway, the concept of culture here is about the last major thing I need. The Latino culture is part of the massive American culture, and I wondered what you thought about that culture expressing itself. We're in such an age of diversity now that the Latino culture as a separate entity, or the American melting pot, any ideas on those?

[00:46:35] **VIC:** Well, I don't know exactly what you're trying to say. To me, I, as a Latino, I always look at a lot of other Latinos as like somebody different. I'm not them, I'm me, and I just don't put myself as the same kind of people that I am. For some reason, that's the way I've always felt since I was a kid. I still have a little bit of a prejudice or something, but I don't consider myself equal to them, even though I might be. But the thing is, that's just the way I feel inside. Sometimes I get that uncomfortable feeling, I guess, that they're not quite the same. Because most of the time, the people who were from Mexico workers—bracero workers—so I always felt that they were from some other country, they're not from here. I don't know if that's what you're talking about as far as the Latinos.

[00:47:34] **RON:** Yeah, that's what I'm talking about.

[00:47:34] **VIC:** But a lot of the American-born Latinos—or Chicanos, they're called—the Chicano is the word for American-born Latin people. I guess you probably know that.

[00:47:47] **RON:** Yeah.

[00:47:47] **VIC:** A person that's from Mexico can't call themselves a Chicano or a Chicana because they're from Mexico. But people from here, that's what they call each other, or that's what the terms mean.

[00:47:56] **HARVEY:** You have a strong identity as a Latino as opposed to an immigrant from Mexico? Is that what you're trying to say?

[00:48:07] **VIC:** I just feel that I'm different. I just feel like I'm different. I know the rights over here. If I was over there, I might feel kind of uncomfortable, but over here I feel like I'm just a little different, you know. I just feel like I'm just different because I don't have to go back to somewhere. I'm here, I'm working, I'm paying my taxes, I'm doing this and that. I've been in the military. I feel everyone should be in the military. I don't know if I told you. My oldest son, I could have got him in as far as a sponsorship, but he wanted to go into the military, the Marines. He contacted some kind of a disease in Korea and ended up dying, so he never got to be part of us. He wanted to do his military duty first. I feel kind of bad that I didn't try to talk him out of it. "Just do this." But sometimes it's in the individual, joining the military. Sometimes there's a reason. You just don't feel like it when there's a war going on. You don't want to get yourself killed, or if you have someone depending on you for an income and you can't afford to do that.

[00:49:12] **HARVEY:** When did he get into the military, about what year?

[00:49:15] **VIC:** I don't know that either. I should know that, but I kind of don't even want to think about it per se because it's really . . . you know, some people are really into their families, and you always think about it when his birthday was. He was born in 66, so he must have been about 18—you'd have to do the math—when he was in there. So whatever math you come up with, that's about the year he was in.

[00:49:43] **RON:** How many children do you have?

[00:49:44] **VIC:** I was married twice and I have two sons from my first marriage. My second son from my first marriage also was in the Marines, and he was a casual worker. I sponsored him. He was going to school to be a naturalist, so he ended up getting a job working for the Fish and Game. He just got up north in California towards Sacramento. He just got a job doing that, and he likes it. Some people, longshoring isn't the same thing. But the reason I wanted to get him in was you can possibly pass that generation onto the next generation and the next generation, and all of sudden you keep that little thing going kind of as a security blanket kind of thing. That's the way I look at it. But children are children and they have a mind of their own, and you have to respect that. You can't be upset with them because they want to do their own thing.

[00:50:35] **HARVEY:** If you look back, do you have any kind of a broad windup statement you'd like to make, like looking back, what it all meant, or something along those lines, kind of a broad statement that you might want to make on looking back at your life and career?

[00:50:53] **VIC:** I didn't quite understand exactly what you just said.

[00:50:58] **RON:** Would you do it all over again?

[00:51:00] **VIC:** Well, I think because of how it's worked out, why mess with it? It seems like you'd do the same thing again. But there is a lot of—like I might not have gotten married, but when you're a youngster, that was the thing to do if you wanted to have intercourse or something like that, or you wanted to have children. I've always wanted to have children eventually, but the thing is I think I would have possibly waited a little bit longer, maybe did it with a different gal. When somebody likes you or is in love with you, that means a lot to

how you feel about life or anything. You're content if something is actually in love with you, so that draws a lot to that particular person to extend a relationship. Now, looking this way, and knowing that, well, I could have went that way and did this, now you can see from up here a different view of it. I think, on the safe side, I would do exactly the same thing, but I would try to get more involved in, like you say, the politics part of why you're doing things or why you're not doing things, or you're doing them just because you should. Just get more involved.

Just like joining the Pensioners Club, no one is making me do that. I feel I want to do that to know what's going on and do my part in that direction. They probably do care if I'm in there, but it's hard to learn, pay attention, listen, meet people, know where they're coming from. You start seeing people that are good speakers or they have certain attitudes. Yeah, I'm learning a lot. The first time I went to one of the Pensioners conventions, I was kind of lost. I didn't know really what it was about. I'm already out of the union, who cares now? Let me go do something different.

Because I used to do artwork as well—pen and ink—and so I would do the artwork and then I would go have it printed, and then I would sell it. So it was like everything, I had to change hats. I had a hat and was doing the drawings, and went down and getting the printwork printed and getting them in all the envelopes, and then trying to sell them.

I'm also a life member of the Sierra Club, so I've done a lot of backpacking. And the Audubon Society, so I started carrying my binoculars when I'm backpacking so I can start recognizing—you know, normally you just walk around. You do "Hey, what kind of bird was that?" So I started enjoying the Audubon Society as well. That's the kinds of things I used to like to do when I was younger, back a lot.

And rowing—scull—doing that. Everything.

[00:53:44] **HARVEY:** Did you join the Pensioners as soon as you retired from the waterfront?

[00:53:47] **VIC:** No, I didn't join right away, but I wanted to join. As soon as I found out that it was available, then I said, "Hey, I'm going to do this, go to the meetings." I have to sit in front because I don't hear good. Once I got out of the military, I didn't hear good at all, so I usually sit in front so I can pay attention and I'm not distracted by the other people. That's the way I do it. And I wasn't going to the luncheons, I was just going to the meetings, but now I've been going to the luncheons and you chat and meet some of the people. I'm antisocial so I'd usually just eat, and I had to go find a table over there and eat by myself. That's the way I'd start to do it. But I'm meeting a lot of wonderful people. I'm pressed.

[00:54:32] **RON:** You are the light.

[00:54:33] **VIC:** Well, I'm tickled pink that you think that way, but you have to talk to my son. I have the baby, he still lives with me at home. He's 44 years old. I haven't been married for 44 years, so he's still with me. So I call myself a single parent because he's still with me.

I had a gal that I met in college. I was taking a ceramics class and so I met this gal there. I told her that I backpacked, so I gave her a life membership for the Sierra Club, and she informed her whole company. It's a biology company that goes out and does biology work and does reports for the State. And she's hired both of my sons to work for her, so it worked out. I remember when I met her, I just got barely got custody of my son and she was holding him, you know, like a little baby. And when we separated, he was carrying her around. That's how long we were boyfriend and girlfriend kind of thing.

[00:55:28] **HARVEY:** Do you still see her?

[00:55:30] **VIC:** Yeah, I still see her. I mean, I don't see her like a girlfriend. Sometimes that affection goes away, that love. Sometimes people still stay married and they really love each other. Me, it's just sometimes you just don't quite have it. It's like a friendship kind of a thing now. You just don't have that love. Some people stick it out regardless if they don't have that love feeling they did when they were wrong, but just for each other's help. But I like to be by myself. I'm self-centered so I like to do my own thing. I don't want try to drag somebody along doing something they don't think they want to do and I don't want to do what they want to do.

But I sure like seeing the gals working on the waterfront, doing all of it—driving the trucks and doing the cranes. If they can do it, equal pay for women and men. But if sometimes you can't do the job, sometimes the men can't do the clerking job and all of a sudden they're struggling and the women can do it easy. So where's the balance about equality as far as work done, actually done?

[00:56:34] **HARVEY:** You say you like to see them down there. Why do you like to see them down there?

[00:56:38] **VIC:** Because I think women are equal to men. I mean, I wouldn't be here without my mother, so she's just as important. I'm not real religious, so they talk about Jesus being the nucleus of the religion, I kind of see it differently. There's a religion where a woman has an equal balance of the power of that dedication to whatever you want to believe in as far as the beginning of time and creation., then I think we'd like to give women more of a chance to fill in where they were denied. Just like a lot of women during the Second World War, they were pilots. A lot of them didn't get a lot of recognition for the Second World War activities that they were involved in when they were flying or mechanics or doing something. So, I kind of think that they should get their share and more.

[00:57:36] **HARVEY:** Great. Thank you very much. Much appreciated it.